DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 638 EA 024 739

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TITLE Biography and Leadership: Exploring Issues of Race and Gender.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (Minneapolis, MN, October 30-November 1, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biographies; Black Leadership; Doctoral Programs; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Leadership; *Racial Bias; *Sex Bias; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *University of Saint Thomas MN

ABSTRACT

The study of biography, particularly the different roles people assume to overcome institutional constraints and prejudice, provides important insight into connections between society and the individual and between leaders and followers. Biography can be used effectively to examine leadership issues, particularly from an African-American perspective. It humanizes history and helps us connect with political, social, and economic forces. Biography is used in this way in a doctoral Educational Leadership Program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The course begins with readings on the nature of biography, experiences of skilled biographers, and sketches of white, male leaders. These works are contrasted with biographies of black leaders, illustrating the importance of difference and alienation in black leadership. Also, it shows African-American leadership as being driven by the search for freedom and autonomy. Biographies of black leaders also highlight the theme of education and the responsibility communities have for educating their members. The class also examines how gender has been a constant barrier to leadership. Biographies can expand leadership theory beyond the white, male experience, and confirm that leaders over time acquire a strong sense of themselves. (Contains 22 references.) (JPT)

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BIOGRAPHY AND LEADERSHIP: EXPLORING ISSUES OF RACE AND GENDER

Paper presentation at the 1992 UCEA Convention in Minneapolis

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Introduction

In his Sociological Imagination, C. Wright Mills implores social scientists to analyze the interplay between biography and history and the connections between "personal troubles" and larger social issues (1959, Chapter 1). It is only in this way, he maintains, that scholars can help individuals to view their personal predicaments as social concerns that must be addressed by the collective reasoning of "self-cultivating publics" who possess the freedom and will to counteract the dehumanizing tendencies of mass society. The study of biography, particularly lives that focus on the ways in which people assume a variety of roles in order to cope with the constraints imposed by modern institutions, gives us important insight into the connections between society and the individual and between leaders and followers. As Mills suggests, it is terribly difficult to write biographies that are sensitive to the nuances and specifics of individual lives because it requires the scholar "to understand the most internal and psychological features of man: in particular, his self-image and his conscience and indeed the very growth of the mind" (1959, p. 161). It is worth it, however, for at the heart of this enterprise, argues Mills, is the recognition that self-educating

individuals can help to foster and maintain a truly humane and participatory democratic community.

It is in the interests of self-education and the promotion of democracy in its fullest sense, that I have pursued the teaching of biography as a way to illuminate leadership issues, and particularly leadership issues from the perspectives of African-Americans and women. One of biography's great values is that it humanizes history (Nevins, 1962). It helps to make the political, social and economic forces of history which can seem so impersonal and remote from our own lives more immediate and relevant. Further, and especially in the case of African-Americans, women, and other oppressed groups, biography helps us gain insight into the struggle to reach positions of leadership despite prejudice, discrimination, and deeply entrenched institutional biases. Additionally, biography helps us to see in highly detailed and concrete contexts the strategies that women and people of color have employed to maintain their standing as leaders and to foster genuine social change (Rampersad, 1983; Heilbrun, 1988).

In this presentation, then, I will describe an elective course I teach for the doctoral students in our Educational Leadership Program that uses the lens of biography to focus on issues of leadership, gender and race. I seek to make a case for the study of biography as an important and stimulating way to study leadership, and further to show how the lives of African-Americans and women can illuminate leadership issues frequently neglected in more conventional courses.

Conventional Biography and the Study of Leadership

I begin the class with readings on the nature of biography, the experiences of skilled biographers, and short sketches on the lives of white, male leaders such as Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman, Walter Lippman, and James B. Conant (Zinsser, 1986; Warner, 1984; Conant, 1970; Preskill, 1992). These readings reiterate and confirm much of what the students have already learned about leadership. But they also introduce the students to a new way of approaching the literature on leadership that helps them to see some of the inadequacies of trait theories of leadership, for instance, that show little sensitivity for the nuances and specifics of leaders who change and develop over time (Bennis, 1989). When they are done well, biographies of leaders focus on a single subject, the subject's times and the intersection between the two (Garraty, 1957). It is one of the few forms available to us that allows us to gain insight into the words, deeds, and ideas that shape and influence the decisionmaking processes of leaders of all kinds and the consequences of those decisions for the larger society (English, 1992).

Biography, Race, and Leadership

These initial readings also establish a basis for contrasting the lives of such black leaders as Frederick Douglass, Booker T.

Washington and Ida B. Wells (McFeely, 1991; Harlan, 1972; Wells, 1970). The lives of these figures echo some of the findings from the earlier materials, but their struggles also help the students to see the special importance of themes like difference, otherness, and alienation. Furthermore, they learn that leadership in this African-American context is uniquely driven by efforts to attain greater freedom and autonomy, to establish a theory and practice of justice that is not exclusive, and to wrest a measure of power and control from the white ruling majority (Rampersad, 1983).

Frederick Douglass's relationship with William Lloyd Garrison is particularly instructive here. As the white leader of the abolitionist movement in the United States during the three decades before the Civil War, Garrison was a mentor and ally to the young escaped slave Frederick Douglass. Yet, despite Garrison's undiminished devotion to the abolitionist cause, his own ingrained prejudices and patronizing attitude toward Douglass prevented Frederick from realizing his full potential as orator and spokesperson for black emancipation. It was only after Douglass's realization that he must break with Garrison and his courageous decision to do so that he was able to take hold as a great leader who was capable of expressing in the most powerful terms the horror and shame of enslavement and the moral imperative of freedom (McFeely, 1991, Chapter 14).

The best biographies about African-American leaders, particularly those that take place before the Civil Rights Movement, evince an awareness of what W.E.B. DuBois called black

"Double Consciousness," that quality of mind bred in the ways and words of African-Americans that forced blacks to maintain a hypersensitivity about their dual status and to efface themselves in the proximity of whites (Rampersad, 1983). This "double consciousness" motivated blacks to use language, myth, metaphor, and song in highly creative ways to subvert and undermine white dominance, and allowed blacks with special talent in these areas to rise to positions of leadership. However, this duality also used up valuable energy that could have been employed by blacks to realize themselves more fully on their own terms (Abrahams, 1992).

Finally, the lives of Black leaders in particular highlight the theme of education and the multitude of responsibilities communities have for providing education to their members. Although many black leaders, especially in late 19th and early 20th centuries pursued teaching as a career, largely because it was one of the few professional options open to them, over time their thinking and action in regard to education expanded to include the variety of societal institutions that have the potential to educate both children and adults. For Douglass, oratory and the abolitionist press were always crucial forums for enlightening and inspiring, but for Washington and Wells, both of whom began as teachers, their opportunities to instruct a wider audience would expand to a variety of institutions. Wells went from teaching to disseminating a fiery pamphlet against lynching. This led to a position on one of the most prominent black newspapers and eventually extended to ongoing efforts to organize blacks and

whites against racism that culminated in her playing a pivotal role in the founding of the NAACP. For Washington, his accommodationist philosophy quickly won him support from white leaders and allowed him to become one of the most visible and powerful black leaders of his day. His eloquent speaking and writing won him national acclaim and led some to conclude, often wrongly, that his opinions were representive of the black community in general. Regardless of how one feels about Washington's legacy as a leader, however, the notion of leader as teacher is a rich one and has been commented on frequently. In looking at black lives, this metaphor assumes a special poignancy in disclosing the heart of black leadership (Preskill, 1992a). Further, studying the lives of black leaders not only helps us to more fully appreciate African-American experience, it assists us as well to reconceptualize our vision of leadership in general.

Biography, Gender, and Leadership

As a black female leader, Ida B. Wells is an especially significant transitional figure in my course, because her life gives the students in my class an opportunity to begin to examine gender as an important variable in understanding leadership. We proceed from Wells' life to Carolyn Heilbrun's Writing a Woman's Life, a work which challenges its readers to see how few women's lives have been written and how superficially most biographers have dealt with the distinctive experience of women. Just as race

consciousness has historically been both a bond and a burden for blacks, so has gender consciousness been a constant struggle that both strengthens and debilitates. Writing a woman's life, according to Heilbrun, as well as for Mary Catherine Bateson in her reflections on the lives of five professional women in Composing a Life, becomes a matter of understanding how that consciousness is dealt with, and how the corollaries of profession, marriage and children, friendship, and aging are addressed (Heilbrun, 1988; Bateson, 1989). We learn that in a society defined by gender, female leaders unwilling to assume traditional roles are viewed as dangerously ambiguous, as neither men nor women. For the 19th century author and feminist George Sand, her unorthodox lifestyle and mixing of female and male characteristics impelled some of her male admirers to call her the "third sex" (Heilbrun, 33-37). Additionally, in the biographies that are most sensitive to gender, the women leaders that are depicted are engaged in a struggle to bring the distinctive experiences and sensibilities of men to bear on the organizations in which they work without being marked as weak, ambivalent, or deficient (Bateson, 1989; Antler, 1987).

In Bateson's Composing a Life the five women she writes about (which includes herself) tell of their struggles to secure and maintain leadership positions, to make the organizations they work for more humane and caring, while striving to raise children and maintain a family life, often with only limited assistance from their significant others and in the face of outright resistance from their organizations. One of the women profiled in Bateson's

work is Johnetta Cole, a black educator, who must struggle with both gender and race, but who also acquires a sensitivity and depth of understanding that is rare in leaders without her breadth of experience. Thus, Cole's life also allows Bateson the opportunity to examine the confluence of race and gender in one leader's life, and for her readers to explore the importance of this background for understanding how she leads and empowers others. Additionally, the women Bateson writes about in her book again encourages readers to rethink their vision of leadership and to put new emphasis on such non-traditional characteristics as cooperation, creativity, and caring (Bateson, 1989; Astin, 1992).

The life of the founder of the Bank Street School of Education, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, offers a context and a narrative to further explore many of the concerns addressed by Heilbrun and Bateson. Mitchell's struggle to maintain a professional and family life and her efforts to bring the experiences and sensibilities of women to the forefront of formal education are the leading themes of this fine biography. Mitchell's biographer, Joyce Antler, also endeavors to develop her theory of "feminism as a life process" through the telling of Lucy Mitchell's story.

In an article about her theory of life-process feminism, Antler explains that she views it as a variant of feminism, underscoring "a single individual's struggle for autonomy, rather than a self-conscious, political strategy for altering the social order" (Antler, 1981, 134). Leadership in Mitchell's time and place, Antler argues, was indeed demonstrating that a woman could make a

mark professionally while maintaining a marriage and raising children. But even within the context of Mitchell's own life, leadership takes on different meanings at various stages of her life. As a young woman, her development and her striving for autonomy depended upon her breaking away from the tradition of dutiful daughter and freeing herself of her father's dominance. Later, establishing herself professionally as a teacher, writer, and school director, while also nurturing an increasingly intimate relationship with her husband and maintaining close ties with her growing children were her chief goals. Finally, even in old age, she crafted a new, creative feminism for herself by "breaking the bonds of dependency created both by her marriage role and her attachment to her work identity" (Antler, 1981, 149).

In addition to being recognized as a leader for her accomplishments as the founder of the Bank Street School and as a writer of many children's stories, Mitchell set an example for other women by showing how both a professional and domestic life could be maintained. Her life reminds us as well that her problems and her struggle were unique to women, that her quest for self-identity was tied, as no man's has been, to escape from the family claim, to the dilemma of having to choose between marriage and career, and to the tensions and opportunities created by widowhood in a patriarchal society (Antler, 1981, 150). Even the work she was best known for, the establishment of the Bank Street School for Education, reflects in important ways the tensions between the private and public spheres, for it symbolizes "the extension of a

family model to a public organization, offering nurturance and support to its initiates," who in turn must use what they learned to influence and enrich the larger society (1981, 150). In important and fascinating ways, Mitchell's life was the very embodiment of the Bank Street vision for education and the wider world.

Conclusion

Using biography to study leadership and diversity offers important advantages. First, biographies humanize important historical issues and help students to see the connections C. Wright Mills has identified between private troubles and public problems. Second, biographies provide a complex, real-life context for understanding the development of leadership. Platitudes about leadership being a function of time, place, and culture are given new meaning as the lives that are being studied unfold. Third, while whites can never fully appreciate what it means to be black, nor men fully comprehend the experience of women, biography may be one of the best vehicles for increasing our sensitivity and empathy about race and gender. Reading and studying biographies and discussing them in a group gives us a chance to explore in considerable depth how racism, sexism, and other formative experiences shape the identity of blacks and women. Fourth, reading biographies, especially the lives of people of color and women, can aid us in enriching and reconceptualizing our view of

leadership, to move beyond the myopia of leadership theory based on the experiences of white males. Last, biographies cast light on one of the possible universals of great leadership--that is, that effective leaders over time acquire a strong sense of their own identity. Their self-knowledge gives them a confidence and sense of their strengths and weaknesses, and feeling for how they are perceived by others that allows them to labor more effectively with co-workers. For African-Americans and women particularly, having a sense of one's identity facilitates the process of influencing both the subordinate and dominant cultures, and moving society, however glacially, toward ideologies and practices that reject subordination and embrace liberation, equality and justice.

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